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Four Quarters

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Damascus, <i>story by M.M. Liberman</i>	3
I Give Up the Thought of Owning Things, <i>poem by Margherita Woods Faulkner</i>	9
Earth, Stone, Brick, Metal: <i>Mannahatta, poem by Alfred Corn</i>	10
Remembering the Oak, <i>poem by Michael Waters</i>	12
Nativity, <i>story by Annabel Thomas</i>	13
Remedial Student Reads a Poem About Pheasants, <i>poem by Daniel Minock</i>	22
The Mother, <i>story by Helen Haukeness</i>	23
Picasso's Pose, <i>poem by James H. Barfoot</i>	27
Poem for the Weekend I Read 35 Western Novels, <i>by Samuel Green</i>	28
Songs for a Soviet Composer, <i>three poems by Kelly Cherry</i>	30
Mina, <i>story by Nahid Rachlin</i>	31
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Marginalia . . .

BACK TO BASICS?

If you've spent half your life teaching English, as I have, you're bound to wince the first time you overhear one of your own children say, "I hate English." Then you remember all the times you've been introduced as an English teacher only to have evoked a similar reaction: an embarrassed smile and the confession—"I always hated English in school." There is another standard reaction to meeting an English teacher, and it is just as devastating: "Oh, you're an English teacher. I better be careful of my grammar."

Such comments reveal that there is a serious misconception about what English really consists of. I have always thought that the teaching of English was fundamentally the teaching of reading and writing, but I find that among those who avow a hatred of English that they are not antagonistic to literature nor rebellious against writing. They hate "English"—the subject that requires memorizing of rules and choosing "right" and "wrong" in endless exercise books. Elementary school students protest that English is "the same old thing year after year—predicate nominatives and that kind of thing." High school students find English a repetition of grade school. But college students often complain that they can't write papers because they didn't learn any grammar in the lower grades. Something is wrong.

In talking about English with my own children, I think I have begun to see what it is. My youngest is an omnivorous reader, yet he says he hates English. He sees no connection between "English" and his love of books. My fourteen year old can turn a neat phrase in the course of dinner table repartee; he would be surprised to learn that such imaginative use of language has something to do with the despised subject of English. The truth of what has gone wrong with English studies has been seeping into my consciousness like a gradually-worsening toothache: we have let the study of English become separated from the study of reading and writing.

I suspect the problem begins very early in the grades, when the mechanical processes of learning to read and write are taught separately, apart from English. English is reduced to memorization of terms and definitions and to identifying the correct and incorrect in fiendishly concocted sentences that are cleverly booby-trapped. In some schools, students study "grammar" year after year; in others, they hardly touch it at all.

(Continued on Page 36)

Damascus

M. M. LIBERMAN

THIS LINE, 'Adrian Prince. Stuck a barbecued chicken leg in Marty O'Brien's ear. Holy Toledo.' is probably as famous in American literature as, say, 'her voice is full of money.' It's from Thomas Neeley's *Last Stop Damascus*. It's inconceivable that she'd think she could get away with swiping it." Having said it, Norton was sorry. You don't imply that your colleagues are unlettered, because they are, and they don't like to be reminded of it. Only last week in committee he had struck the president dumb with Dr. Johnson's line on tenure and things between them would never be the same. The president was a very vain man. Most people are. Norton put his jacket on the back of his chair and loosened his tie although the room was underheated for January. When would he ever learn?

The girl's name is Maretta Welcome. Her skin in this light is a near-mauve. Her hair is a tumble of loose black curls piled high. Her steel-rimmed glasses are too small for her broad nose, too big for her softball face and threaten to slide off as she gestures emphatically with her head alone. Her hands she keeps folded in her lap in the old-fashioned way. Her mouth, bruised cherry, seems always to say, "Oh." She crosses and uncrosses her stubby legs at the ankles. Norton tries to see behind the thick lenses to the eyes, and so to the heart, but it's no use. A fluorescent bulb flickers and is no match for the dark outside. Having discussed her case, they had brought her in, cutting a singularly strange figure, Norton thought, here in this small room with five men.

"I haven't been so good a student," she says, not looking at anyone, as if reading from some invisible tablet somewhere between herself and them, "but I don't plage-ize. I know there are kids that plage-ize. But that's not me. I haven't been so good in my work because of the school at home, but I don't copy." Norton is astonished to hear such a womanly contralto wash slowly out and over him from this small round child.

Even on this small campus, Norton cannot recall having

ever seen Maretta Welcome. She is probably one of those poor things who hide quivering in their rooms for four years, coming out only for classes, meals, toothpaste and church. They are up half the night, alone, worried, picking out words from books one at a time like crumbs. She was Henry Reach's student in Advanced Composition, where some in the class wrote fiction. She had submitted *Last Stop Damascus*, word for word, from Neeley's celebrated Chapter Five. "Christ," he told Norton, "she didn't even bother to fake a title." When Henry Reach had called her in, he asked her what she took him for, and she had said, "You my professor, also my editor."

"I'm your professor, Maretta, but I'm not your editor, or Thomas Neeley's, or a fool. I've read a few books. That's why I teach here. You turned this in as your own story, but you lifted it word for word from Thomas Neeley."

"I don't know no Neeley."

"That's the trouble, Maretta, I do. No, the *real* trouble is that you can't steal somebody else's words."

Norton had told Henry Reach that he supposed this Maretta Welcome had lost her mind, poor girl. Maybe not much of a mind to begin with. Things get to be too much for some of these kids on a campus so stuck on itself. Henry thought so too and had asked her if she was having emotional difficulties, problems at home, or with her other courses, or with a boyfriend. She said she had no home. She had been raised by an aunt after her mother had died. She had never seen her father. Her tuition was being paid for by the lodge her uncle had joined before he died. Her aunt had a new husband who didn't want her around. She was doing O. K. in her courses. She had picked up her coat then and moved slowly to leave his office, saying over her shoulder, "There is no boyfriend, and I don't have any trouble until right now," and left Henry Reach sitting with his chin in his fist. Then she came right back and knocked on the still half-open door, as if she hadn't just been there and when he said she might as well come back in if she had anything she wanted to say, she looked him flat straight in the eye and said, "Professor Reach, this nigger don't steal."

THE RULES said that at such hearings there must be two people present from the department bringing the charges, the professor himself and an associate of his choice, to act as impartial advisor to the committee. Norton, from the beginning, wanted to decline, but Henry Reach was the other senior mem-

ber of the department and an old friend. There was no decent way to say no thanks. Now it was close to his dinnertime and his gut was beginning to hurt. Once again he wished he might have contrived a way to finesse this business. He had been in on academic dishonesty cases before, two or three, in years past, when he had been a young instructor among peers. He recalled their outraged zeal in bringing cheating culprits to justice, and later he came to wonder if it had been worth it, the tears, the disgrace in the name of integrity of the institution. Where was his colleagues' concern for that integrity when in 1970 they either condoned it or looked away when the place shut down altogether, as if the way to end a war were to burn the books once again? Either the girl was hopelessly stupid or deranged or both, but in any case she was pitiful and no matter what the disposition of the matter everyone would lose. How fortunate they were, these men who over the years had locked away a dozen or so ethical absolutes like polished invaluable stones.

Irwin Dugan asks Maretta if she has ever read Thomas Neeley—he calls him Robert Neeley—the voice of the professor of philosophy coming to him as if from another room, muffled but heavy, hectoring in its very politeness; voice into sight, these words bounce high and slowly descend, hostile objects which Norton identifies as losses, old and to come, familiar. The committee adjourns without coming to a decision. Maretta trudges away alone. Henry Reach asks Norton if he is walking or if he wants a ride. Tired, Norton rides. For two blocks there is no conversation, and when Henry Reach says, finally, “Is it possible that kid imagines she wrote that? I mean does she think she’s Thomas Neeley?” Norton doesn’t catch his words, because he is regarding Maretta Welcome in astonishment. He could swear she is, a quarter of a mile away, yes, every fourth step, skipping. As he is about to get out of the car Henry Reach asks about the way he had put the president down. “What was the quotation from Johnson?” Norton confesses he doesn’t know it exactly but Boswell asks something like shouldn’t we constantly be reevaluating our basic assumptions and the old boy says, perhaps, but no man wants to go on trial for his life every morning. Henry Reach says that’s good and good night.

Norton feels better after a good dinner with some wine. He permits himself a cigarette and then a cigar. He thinks about his own children, one, a son in graduate school at Ann Arbor, another married in upstate New York with children of her own. He marks his wife, Pearl, reading, the lamp to her left the only light against the quick, final onset of winter night. He takes satisfaction in her good looks. She is a lovely dark

woman, no longer a girl. He adores her good sense; he even cherishes her silences. Her smile, he now realizes, is the most important thing in his life because it is so rare and the children have become somehow abstracted in his mind; he no longer contemplates younger women, and he has come wistfully but surely to terms with a certain disappointment, his work. He had started out in this profession thinking his colleagues were fools, his students for the most part unteachable, and his own scholarship trivial. When the children were born a year apart he put aside such attitudes as too costly and worked hard. His books were translated everywhere. How it happened he wasn't sure or he had forgotten or didn't want to remember. It had to do with some little peculiarly humiliating set-back or other. Anyway he awoke one morning soon afterward unable to meet his class. His legs would not get out of bed. He said to himself, "I was right to begin with." He feigned a bad cold for a week. Then he got some pills from his doctor and went back to work. Only he and Pearl knew that anything had changed.

Later in bed he cannot sleep thinking of Maretta Welcome. Yes, she is cracked or a self-deluded liar or both and then the phone rings and it is Webb Kirby, who counsels black students. He wants to know if the committee has reached a decision and when Norton tells him no he asks what Norton thinks of the whole business, if he wouldn't mind telling him. Norton likes Kirby. They share an interest in lacrosse. Kirby, while an uncultivated man, has a good gritty mind. Norton says he thinks this is as much as anything a matter for the college's part-time psychiatrist. Maretta is sure as hell a plagiarist, but just as surely is she nuts. Webb Kirby says thanks.

When the committee reconvenes, David Koe, a chemist, says that Maretta's mental health is none of their business. He says a report from Dr. Wilson James is out of order. Ted West, a musicologist, says perhaps it isn't. Norton argues that they shoud read the report. If the girl is sick, according to Dr. James, the committee can then simply refuse to judge the case and turn the matter over to Academic Standing. They, in turn, can deal with it as they deal with other cases where unacceptable student behavior becomes a matter, officially, between the student and his parents, and the student's record is, so to speak, put in the deep freeze, and even as he argues this way he knows that this has nothing to do with Maretta Welcome, who has no parents.

They vote four to one to look at Dr. James's report. Cut through the jargon and circumlocution and the passive voices and the damnable barbaric verbal tics, the basicallys and the

in-terms-offs and Maretta Welcome is one of the walking mad. The committee decides to wash its hands of the matter.

The next day during office hours Norton gets a visit from Leon Casey, head of BSC, Black Student Caucus. Casey is about seven feet tall, affects a tribal aspect, clothes, beads and the rest, threatens to threaten to put his feet on Norton's desk, but his middle class upbringing prevails and, try as he will to do otherwise, he speaks to Norton almost politely.

"BSC doesn't want this case to go to Academic Standing. They will just say that Maretta is off the wall and send her home. That leaves the important, you know, ethical question unanswered. She says she didn't steal that stuff."

"Casey, have you ever read Thomas Neeley?"

"No."

"Maretta's story, all thirty-two pages of it in typescript, is word for word from a famous book of his called *Last Stop Damascus*. Does that sound as if Maretta didn't steal it?"

"Sounds different."

"Different, how?"

"I don't know. It sounds different. You know, she never steals anything. She's very straight."

"Nobody says she steals things."

"You say so."

"I'm not talking about television sets, Casey. I'm talking about someone taking somebody's composition and saying he wrote it."

"People do that all the time. White musicians been playing Louis Armstrong's stuff for years. You kidding?"

"That's different and you know it."

"That's what I mean. It's different."

"Look, Casey, I don't think we're getting anywhere. Maybe you'd do better talking to Professor Reach. He brought the charges."

"His mind is made."

"O.K. then why don't you talk to Thomas Neeley?"

An outsize smile opens Leon Casey's face wide. "Hey," he says, "That's cool."

Norton and Henry Reach discuss the case of Maretta Welcome and trail off into a consideration of Thomas Neeley. He was good for one huge novel a year, every one of which sold well, most of which were reviewed favorably, except in the respectable journals where they were ignored as mere sociology. Only *Damascus*, his first novel, a terse, strange, powerful, puzzling account of the suicide of a fundamentally uninteresting man was both a popular and a critical success, an acknowledged

classic in the genre of American manners. His short stories: he seemed to have invented the characteristically modern American type. Even Hemingway admitted that. But Neeley's reluctance to have them anthologized made him an unknown in the classroom where literature gets respectable. Neeley, a cranky, perverse, dissipated hulk of an Irishman came to hate editors, critics, publishers, reviewers, other writers and blamed them loudly for seeing to it that he didn't get the "badges" he deserved. His age is given here as seventy-nine, there as eighty-one. Henry Reach wondered how he would survive the long trip from New Haven. Norton said he understood the old fellow was not in bad shape for the kind of life he had lived. It beat Henry Reach how in hell Leon Casey had brought it off. "Well, Neeley has a sister in Minneapolis. I think he may have been coming this way anyway," he said, answering his own question, which seemed to Norton no answer at all and he knew that Henry Reach knew it. There was no easy way in the world to explain Thomas Neeley's answering the phone one cold January afternoon and agreeing to travel half way across the country to meet with the faculty of any college about a case of academic dishonesty involving a little round myopic and probably wildly balmy black nineteen-year-old. Unless, of course, Neeley was as senile as Maretta Welcome was out to lunch.

NORTON HAS a dizzying sense of personal displacement as he sits with Henry Reach and Leon Casey in the airport diner sipping coffee. Faulkner, of course, claimed to have heard voices, but that was a put-on, because that's the way he was and the fools would believe anything. It suited Norton better to think it possible that Maretta Welcome could read a book, forget she had read it, and retain verbatim an entire chapter, but Henry Reach had said, "Not Maretta, and frankly, I've had about enough of this business. I don't know why in hell I'm still involved in this. If it had been a white student there would have been no Leon Casey, no bruhaha and no Thomas Neeley. The last time, for God's sake, Thomas Neeley talked straight out to a black, he made sure he was Hasty Pudding. I've half a mind to call him up and tell him to please stay home and let us poor dummies take care of our own troubles. Jerks. That's what he called militant blacks. I wonder if Leon knows that."

Henry Reach has his way. There is no need any longer to meet Thomas Neeley's flight because Leon Casey gets a call

from Maretta Welcome. Thomas Neeley, drunk out of his mind, fell down an escalator at O'Hare airport and died almost immediately on the spot. On the way back in Henry Reach's car, sharing the back seat with Leon Casey and innumerable Pepsi bottles, (the passenger seat in front is out of order), listening to the whining silence of the freeway at night, Norton recalls that the reviewer had written, "Professor Norton's theories, to put the matter as generously as possible, are highly derivative." At Maretta Welcome's room, an hour later, Henry Reach asks to see the telegram. There is no telegram. Then there was a phone call. There was no phone call. Maretta Welcome reports that Thomas Neeley's last words were, "I was never meant to be a Cadillac or any other kind of dealer, Father." The two men look astonished at Leon Casey who holds his paunch and laughs as if it were going out of style, failing to notice Maretta Welcome altogether, who doesn't laugh, only listens, but not to them.

I Give Up the Thought of Owning Things

MARGHERITA WOODS FAULKNER

Things come now ungrieving
Like moths to the cheeks of stone
That pulse with wings already leaving
Gathering strength from what has flown.

Things come now ungrieving
To settle an old dispute:
Never a net could mortise
An alabaster foot.

Earth, Stone, Brick, Metal: 'Mannahatta'

ALFRED CORN

It has the shape of
A boat with the Battery
For prow—and was always in overhaul
As the thresholds and lofts rose and fell,
Then rose higher, harder, until they became
As inevitable as landscape. Now
Embedded in brute stone, a man struggles
To emerge. He does all you do, in greater
Volume; has an anatomy that functions
Much like yours, but for all soul only what
An occasional rare observer lends,
Citizens or outsider; and if you see
Dawn wreath the city in a mythic
Light, it may be he has appointed you
For this role. There is no helicopter like
The mind's eye, nor any weather better

Than a clear cold winter
Afternoon, say, to be
Lifted as high as the neutral splendor
Of five hundred high-rises that with frank
Hauteur cleave the North American air.
From the sublime expanse of the bridges
Alone one could die. Human and daily
Tributary pours in from the boroughs,
Dredged up by trains that with sudden magic are
Airborne, over water, afire with cold
Sunlight—before they funnel back into earth.
It rumbles underfoot, a resonance
Of granite, metals, ice. From the gratings
Plumes of steam rise to annihilation
Above the glassy branches of a bare tree
Tossing in the wind's manage; and through these,

A glint of distant steel,
You are carried forward,
Log in the rapids, jammed at a spillback;
A bus swims from curbside with one sad rider;
Limousines deposit precious cargo
At the Four Seasons; tricolor flags turn
As barber poles over the Museum,
Fountains drained, air sharpened with a stench
Of charcoal and sauerkraut. Sausage-linked coal-scows
Nose down the Hudson, afloat the blinding
Waters of sunset. Laundry flaps in the slums;
And just before dark, the windows ignite; now
Lamps in bright strings cross the park. The skyline
Is jeweled; cold; like nothing else on earth.
Like nothing else on earth the restless hum
Of this place—a question not yet answered.

Remembering the Oak

MICHAEL WATERS

I have taught my son to hammer nails,
barely, into the tree. He believes
squirrels need help
climbing.

If the owl in that tree remembers
field-mice offering themselves
on tables of fresh snow,
if the oak

memorizes each brown leaf like a son,
perhaps my son will remember
this nailing business
years from now.

He'll be hammering his own stubborn
nails into boards, sweating
like Christ in the sun,
thumbs blackening

when the leaves above him will whisper
with the rustling of an owl.
He'll remember the oak,
still growing

from the soil in southern Ohio,
the nails climbing the trunk
like furious locusts,
the father

who held his fist like the first
spring leaf, who remains
rooted like memory
in the earth.

Nativity

ANNABEL THOMAS

1.

SO YOUR GIRL jilted you, Bobby?" Mrs. Proctor asked.
"Yes, Mama."

By sheer effort of will Robert kept his voice steady and stood watching her continue to pack tomatoes into glass jars as if he'd told her the springing cow had calved or the mail would be late out from town.

Beside them on the stove the canner seethed and bubbled. Robert threw the letter on the table. He was tall and heavy-shouldered with unkempt hair that stood on his head in tufts. The only sound in the room was the popping of jar lids. Mrs. Proctor looked over at the letter. Then he saw her gaze slide to the jars she had just lifted out of the canner where they stood in an immaculate row reflected in the surface of the sinkboard. He knew by the way her mouth moved that she was counting them.

Beyond the tomatoes, ranged along the wall, were other canned foods grouped according to kind. She had been the summer putting them up. There was a row of peaches, the golden halves perched on one another in erect broad-shouldered quarts. Glasses filled with grape jelly were stoppered neatly with paraffin. Watermelon pickles lay murky and insular bottled in green glass. The depths of all the jars shone with cold restrained colors like gems.

After she had checked them over, Mrs. Proctor picked up the letter and looked at it through the bottoms of her spectacles.

"She's made up her mind," she said. "You'd best go back to school without seeing her at all. You'll be dropped if you stay away."

"She's got no right to break off."

"No. But being a Lennox, she doesn't care, you see. Her father's the same. He's got no feel for duty and no idea of getting on in the world. He serves me just so with the land he farms for me. He'll go miles off to preach at a revival when

the corn should be planted."

"Meg promised to marry me when I finished school," Robert said. "I'll hold her to it."

"You can't as she's no sense of keeping her word. They're an immoral bunch, I say. No pride in what they own or the work they do. How can you make pledges with people like that? You'd best let her go and count it good luck. It was a bad match from the start. I said so. Her sort can't do for themselves. Nine children hungry and the father off preaching gratis. He's an educated man, you know. Still, he's content to do other folks' farming. There's not a whole stick of furniture in the house though I've given them nice pieces and so have others."

"She's going as a missionary to Africa," Robert said. "She'll be poor as dirt."

"Only a Lennox would do it."

Robert made no answer. Thinking of the letter, he felt his neck and face flush. He breathed through his mouth.

"She's not worth the spit off your tongue," his mother said. "Not a fit wife for a professional man as you'll be. You go back to college now, Bobby. It's better left as it is."

A breeze sprang in at the kitchen window pressing back the curtain and ruffling the feathers of the canary in its cage so that it shook itself.

"Ah, Biddy, has the wind brushed you?" said Mrs. Proctor. She reached up and shut the window half way.

She set the last jars of tomatoes into the canner, lifting them expertly with the tongs. The heat off the steaming water reddened her broad face so that she and the cans were much of a color. She stood at the sink counting the jars.

The canary peeped, hopped a little way, and began anxiously pecking at the perch.

"You want seeds, do you?" said Mrs. Proctor in a high falsetto, condescending to the bird and faintly jeering. "But you know you are far too fat already," she cried. "You care for nothing but seeds now that you've lost your song. You're grown big as a chicken where once you were slender. You're so old it's clear I must make an end of you soon. You haven't sung these three months."

She gave the bird a dipper of seed and turned back to her son.

"Go to college," she urged. "Go along. Go along. It's better that you part from her."

"I can't."

"But hadn't you as well have done with her?" his mother persisted. "The girl's got strange ways. I saw it from the first.

She didn't want you as a husband only, she wanted the soul out of your body. She knew at last she wouldn't have it and now she's gone off. Isn't that the way of it?"

Robert ground his teeth.

"You go back and finish your course. She'll be sorry when you're a graduate veterinarian, I promise you," his mother said. "When you're a great success treating pet dogs and cats, for that's where the money lies, when you have an office with a glass door in the town and money to plant this farm to grain full acreage, then she'll see her mistake."

Robert put his fingers violently through his hair.

"I'm damned if I can let her go!" he said.

They heard a step.

"Here's Meg now, come up the field," Mrs. Proctor said. "You'll settle it between you."

"Where is she?"

"On the porch."

"Why doesn't she knock?"

"She will. She must always stroke the cat first."

A silence held the room. Then the footsteps began again and a rapid light knock was heard at the door. The knob turned gently and the girl stood on the threshold, pale and slender, holding a shawl around her face.

"Sit down, Meg," Mrs. Proctor said, indicating a chair at the kitchen table.

"Eh, Robert, are you come home?" the girl cried out in a low voice, seating herself.

"How are you, Meg?" he asked her.

"I'm well, thank you, Robert. I've brought the rent, Mrs. Proctor."

"I'm obliged. And how's your family keep?"

"Ma's back hurts her. I'll do her milking tonight."

"And so you're off on a ship, Meg?" Mrs. Proctor continued, beginning to scrub off the table. "When is it to be?"

"Two weeks a Thursday."

"What does your father say about your going?"

"Pa says, 'God's will be done.' The people have a great need."

"You're life'll be changed."

Mrs. Proctor turned away to the cleaning up. Robert sat looking down at his shoe.

"I was sorry to send you such a letter, Bob," Meg said, fixing him with her dark steady eyes. "You know I'd rather have told you and us sitting face to face like we are now. Are you going back to college soon?"

"No."

"Why, what are you planning to do then?" cried his mother swinging around on him in exasperation.

But Robert got up without answering, walked to the window and stood looking out with his back to the kitchen. The rest of Meg's visit, he stood there unable to make himself speak to her. When the girl went away he watched her cross the field down through the cattle, her black shawl bold against the green pasture and flapped over her shoulders.

In the afternoon Robert walked out over the place. The house was made of brick and had had the first plastered walls in the county and later the first plumbing and the first electric wiring. There was a chicken yard in use to the right of the house and a pig pen behind. The truck garden lay to the left and down the slope. The house was built on a hill like a castle and all the fields rolled from it: here second cutting hay, there corn, there soybeans, pasture fields and the brown tilled acres where winter wheat was sprouting.

The dairy barn was painted red. During his lifetime, Robert's father kept a fine large herd of Jersey cattle which he, the father, had loved. Now the stanchions were only partially filled at milking time.

Robert knew his mother looked forward to the day he would come home from college and tear down the dairy barn to make room for storage bins. She wished to put the farm entirely to grain. Grain prices were high while milk brought in little money. She had pestered his father to get rid of the cattle. It was the one thing he had denied her.

Robert moved into the pasture field among the cattle. He ran his eye over each animal as was his habit, calculating poundage, condition, stage of lactation and market value.

He stamped morosely among the beasts slapping now this one now that one on the rump until they gave way before him.

A part of the herd was young heifers but a number of the original cows still remained. They were tamer than the rest. By the way they crowded around him, he recognized them as the old cows which had known his father.

The hides of these cattle were dappled and they were delicately made, superb dairy types with dish faces. While Robert marked the veining of the udders and the setting of the tail-bones, unwillingly he became conscious of their eyes.

The irises were brown and translucent so that he looked beneath them at shadings of violet and flecks of white. Lying deep back was an area of secret awareness. They remembered his father. He was sure of it. They stood trembling, staring at him with their curious, deep eyes.

DURING THE AFTERNOON Meg leaned to shake a rug from an upstairs window of the tenant house. She glanced over the countryside and her sharp eyes found Robert among the cattle. Her pulse quickened at the sight for she sensed in him a raptness that startled and bemused her. It was as if she saw another man, hidden in Robert's body until now, come out and stand before her. He raised his head and looked at her. She lifted her hand. Then each turned quickly away feeling somehow caught out in a secret by the other.

Meg continued with the housework. She watched her own quick, slim fingers make up the beds, sweep the floors, wash the children and every moment, plain as the sight of her own working hands, the figure of Robert stood on the outer rim of her consciousness as she had seen him standing in the pasture field.

Meg helped get supper and feed the younger children. Her mother was daily overburdened with work. There was constant cooking, scrubbing, sewing, and ironing to be done. Meg, as the eldest girl, kept her fingers flying doing for the young ones. Still, the time was fast coming when they would be able to do for themselves.

Evening shadows stretched across the land. The wind dropped. Meg, with her shawl tied round her waist, carrying several buckets, stepped out of the house and walked through the fields.

She slowly climbed the hill following a dusty cow path. As far off as she could see, the fields of beans and corn continued. She walked through pasture land yellowing now in the hot dry end of summer but lush and wide still. On the slope nearest her, the chickens were scattered like pieces of white paper.

There was the Proctor house, there the hay barn, the machine shed, the silo, the corn bins, the dairy barn, all she'd looked on every day of her life. Now she was going away. In all likelihood, she would never see them again. Nor would she see Robert, whose presence she felt everywhere.

She could leave the farm without a backward look. Robert was another matter. It was as if, now, walking to the barn, she felt his fingers twined with hers as they'd been more often than not through the years. By Bob's side, she'd known who she was. Apart from him, who on God's earth would she be?"

In the dairy barn, Meg set down her buckets and tucked up her skirt before she saw Robert standing watching her from the shadows.

"You'll not get on that boat," he said.

She saw that he was trembling.

“Bob, I’ve got to go.”

“You gave your word to me. You can’t go back on it.”

Meg, standing in the transparent dusk of the milking parlour, felt the sweet breath of the cows about her. Now and then one or another of them moved its head, knocking its horns against the stanchion.

“I think, Bob,” she said gently, frowning, “our love was a shallow sort.”

“No!”

“Listen won’t you? You’ll see I’m right. It was such a young feeling. It was ourselves we loved, not each other. It’s better to cut loose from that.”

She saw he did not hear anything of what she said. She knew he couldn’t endure her to win over him even as it had been when they were children.

He laid hold on her, lifting her to him. His fingers bruised her so that she rested heavily against him, turned giddy by the pain.

“You’ll marry me,” he brought out, almost beyond speaking. “I’ll see to it!”

He pressed against her, pushing his mouth onto hers. She jerked back. They struggled, stumbling, to the back of the milking parlour behind the cattle where she lost her footing and went down on the floor in the straw and dung. He knelt over her, big as a mountain, strong as a bull. She caught his breath on her face, hot and rapid, filling her nostrils and her mouth.

Scrambling and sliding, she got to her feet, pulling herself up along the wall. He snatched at her clothes. She ducked in among the cattle who were moving about uneasily, lifting their heads now and then to bellow. He caught at her hair as she flung open the door and ran out into the barn lot.

Across the field she could see the headlights of her father’s truck standing by the hay rick. She started toward it, walking a little dizzily, with her head down. She could hear Robert trudging doggedly after her through the blackening dusk.

3.

MEG’S FATHER came to meet them, swinging the lantern at his side, lighting his feet.

“There’s a cow down and can’t get up,” he said. “She’s calving but there’s something amiss. Listen.”

They stood quiet. After a while they heard the cow bellow. They found her lying on her side at the edge of the pasture. She

was big with calf and in bitter misery trying to give birth. Her eyes were wide and glassy. She looked toward them, not registering their presence, knowing only her own self, the agony of her need. Robert realized she had been trying to calve a long time.

He threw off his shirt, twisted it around her neck and kicked and pulled her onto her feet. She grunted, lurched, went to her knees. He whacked her rump and she struggled up once more.

"Hold her," Robert said, handing the shirt to Lennox.

Meg stepped up and gripped the twisted shirt, placing her hands beside her father's. The cow strained forward, half-falling. Between them they held her steady. Her breathing was harsh and painful.

Robert plunged his hand and arm up to the shoulder into the cow's body along the birth canal. The cow lunged forward and bellowed hoarsely.

"Now, dammit, hold her," Robert cried.

Meg and her father leaned their weight against the cow's head and chest. The creature's breath smelt of soured hay. She groaned while they twisted the shirt in their hands, Meg at one side, her father at the other. Robert struggled against the cow's contracting muscles, his face, his chest and back dripping with sweat. The veins stood out on his forehead as he worked to touch the calf. At last he felt it but only the tail bone.

The position was wrong, then. He would have to turn the calf to bring the back legs out. The headlights of the truck shone on his naked shoulders as he strained at the work.

"Is there a hay bale in the truck?" he panted.

"Yes," Lennox answered. "I came out to feed."

"I need bale twine."

When Meg ran to get the twine, the cow tried to lie down. Robert and Lennox fought to keep her up. Robert took the twine from Meg and looped it with his teeth and the fingers of his free hand.

He rocked the calf with all his strength. His arm in the birth canal was numb. He heaved again, grunting with the effort.

He believed he would never turn the calf. He pushed, his face blanching, his breath rasping in his throat. Push, rest, push again.

At last he was able to bring up the feet into his cramped fingers and to fasten the twine to them. He began to pull strongly, bracing his feet and throwing his whole weight against the calf's legs. He continued pulling hard, leaning back. One

piece of twine broke and Robert fell back, staggering. Then he must work to place fresh twine on and pull again.

When at last he got the legs straightened, he cried, "Let her loose."

Meg and Lennox relaxed their hold and the cow stumbled, floundered forward and went down, bellowing. Robert went down with her and lay behind her gently bringing out the calf, letting the cow push and pulling along with her in a strange shared rhythm. He relaxed in his efforts, ceasing to force his will on the cow. He let her have her way, only helping her as he could.

It seemed to him the strange exalted pulling would go on forever. His arm throbbed somewhere far off from himself, not a part of him any longer. The cow groaned and her muscles, as she pushed on the calf, ground his arm against her pelvic bone.

He scarcely connected the sensation with his own body. He pulled on in a dream, bathed in a deep yearning. Robert wanted the calf to come. He pulled and wanted to bring the calf out alive. Aching, with a quiet longing, he pulled, groaning along with the cow, and slowly the calf began to come.

An inch, two inches, the hind legs, the hocks. The front legs were out, the head. Robert lay back in a pool of greenish putrid afterbirth holding the dark wet calf. At once he scrambled to his feet and jerked the calf up by its hind legs, lifting it clear of the ground so that its full length dangled in the air and shook it until the mucus ran from its mouth. After a little, it snorted coughed and began to shiver.

He set it down.

"It's alive!" cried Lennox hoarsely. "I saw it breathe."

Robert laughed weakly and leaned against the truck. The cow lay at his feet, exhausted but at peace.

A warmth settled over Robert's shoulders. He knew Meg had thrown his shirt over him but he did not look at her or speak. He was too content. All his rage was dissolved away.

He came to himself suddenly to discover Meg's face, pale in the cowl of her dark hair, looking up into his. He divined that time had elapsed without his knowing. He felt she had spoken to him but he had been unconscious of her words.

"What?" he said.

"As Father's gone to milk the cows, I'll go along home now," she repeated haltingly.

"I'll walk you down."

He moved beside her, putting on his shirt. He had begun to chill as the night air touched his wet body. He smelt of the stinking afterbirth. The skin of his arms and chest were stiff

with it. He thought of a hot bath, clean clothes. As they walked along in silence, gradually his shivering grew less.

They stepped from the darkness of the fields into the strong beam of the yard light.

“What is it you’re thinking of?” Meg asked him as she had used to do when they were children. He found her sharp gaze on him.

“I was thinking,” he answered, “that if you must go, then you must.”

“I’ll pump some water for you to wash,” she said.

“It’ll wait till I get home.”

But she said, “Lean over and cup your hands.”

She began to push down the pump handle. It took all her effort. He watched her as she panted and strained to bring up the water. The ridges and knots of her muscles were strange to him and her breath that came in grunts of effort. At last the water flowed in a pure gush.

He stripped away his shirt once more and plunged his hands into the cold clear water. It made him tremble but he welcomed the icy flushing. He ducked his head under the pump. The water sluiced over his shoulders and back and down his arms. He threw back his head, flinging the water from his eyes, and laughed aloud.

She gave him her shawl to dry himself. He swept back his hair with his fingers and put on his shirt, buttoning it about his throat and over his chest. He took up a stick and scraped the mud from his shoes. Then he leant forward and drank from the pump, holding his mouth to the last trickling stream as she stood on the platform, her skirts flapping around her like wings, braiding up her hair.

Remedial Student Reads

A Poem About Pheasants

DANIEL MINOCK

He imagines himself hunting,
walking down rows of corn
in thin rectangulars,
going for miles around a perfect tree,
never moving his hands,
determined not to miss
a single dry sound.

When, in the middle of a row,
like a large fruit offered with leaves,
or a wild orchid, say a mocassin-flower,
like possibility itself, the rooster
leaps into the air, what a target!
But Remedial's shotgun
has already gone off pointing straight up.
As the shot rains its pattern down
all around him, but missing him,
the pheasant disappears
in perfect flight behind the perfect tree.

The Mother

HELEN HAUKENESS

THE HOSPITAL'S pediatric wing was zoolike to the mother: listless children captive in railed beds, chores performed by watchful keepers, stuffed animals huddled in corners like bizarre decoys rather than the playthings they were meant to be. Her own body and thought frozen by the gravity of her son's illness, she sat beside him clutching hope of escape.

The thick hospital custard and the clear soup sat in their dishes untouched.

"One spoonful," the mother said softly to her son. "Pretend you are a baby bird. Open your mouth like a baby bird. One spoonful."

From somewhere beyond the dizzy yellow walls a high-pitched wail brought a scurry of footsteps. The mother's wet-palmed hand tightened around the spoon handle. "One bite," she whispered. The little boy made a whimpering sound; the mother dropped her hand on the plastic tray. She stared at the colorful placemat decorated with clowns and elephants and chubby teddy bears. *Teddy Roosevelt, big-game hunter.*

Her mind wandered into a dream of lush jungles, placid lakes, and muscular men in pith helmets. Everything was a dream; her son lying feverishly on the bed was a dream, she herself a monstrous unreality, a numbed mass of blood and bones. The unreality was a throbbing tooth which some good doctor would anesthetize and yank out. The doctors, a new drug, would resurrect a healthy body from her son's wretchedness and the nightmare would recede. Tomorrow.

Straightening her shoulders to keep from dozing (she sat by him both day and night), the dream faded—she saw the blue veins in the boy's temples, the limp fingers curled into dry palms. Her mind focused on necessity: the child must eat. from his caterwauling first hours of life to his four-year-old robustness of two weeks ago she had been source of love and food, food and love. Each was indivisible from the other. Peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate milk were wine and wafers,

the substance that gave love. Eat, eat . . . Now her love alone could not give him life; the child must eat.

Stung, stunned by the ineffectuality of love, she turned again to his meal tray. "Milk?" she wheedled. "It will make you feel better. A sip." Standing close to him, she raised his bird-boned shoulders from the pillow. "One swallow," she murmured, holding back her anger at his rejection of food, rejection of her love.

The boy drank, obedient to his knowledge of her omnipotence. Reassured of the power of her will, the mother leaned over him, her long hair touching his face, his arms. She caressed him with the feather touch of her silky hair against his skin.

But he could not keep food in his stomach. Tired streams of vomit soiled his hospital gown. The mother slipped the cotton shift from his body and covered him with a clean gown from the stack on his bedstand. Her eyes spoke to the boy, his weakness and her helplessness a shared defeat. She and her son were one person, as in the months before his birth they had been one person: together whole as an apple, full as a single drop of rain. Standing beside him, looking into his eyes, she saw her own eyes. As she comforted him, his became the face of her own mother. She wanted to lie beside him and be comforted.

From the hospital corridor, adult laughter pushed itself into the room, jarring the closeness. Refusing to allow separation, the mother began to speak softly to her son of his play-things at home, the pictures they had looked at together, of trips they had taken. But the boy grew tired of listening. When she saw he was tired, she tasted bitterness in her own throat. She sat unmoving by his bed; his pain was her pain, his silence was her silence; together they were one silence.

A month ago the mother's young mouth had curved upward like a fresh new moon's, but now she sheathed herself in remoteness. The father, coming to the hospital after his day's work, was helpless in his attempts to comfort her, to comfort the boy. Ill at ease, he moved his big body restlessly in the chair beside the bed, his eyes cloudy with fear. "When summer comes, we'll play ball," he said miserably to his son. "We'll fish for catfish in the river. We'll go camping in the woods."

To his wife he said, "You've got to rest. Don't you see you can't keep this up without rest?" Without an answer, defeated by her distance, he went on, "When he needs you, you'll need your strength."

But her husband, the doctor, the technicians who drew blood, the professionally cheerful young nurses were distant from her, figures on a movie screen she was too preoccupied to

watch. Her son must live: she insisted that he live. Sometimes, toward morning, the trees on the hospital lawn far below shone silver in the first light of daybreak, and gazing through the window at the shimmering leaves and cool pink sky, she felt hope. Then she stood close to him, matching her breathing to his.

The rejected fluids of his body continued to soil him, the medicines did nothing to change the direction of his illness. When the doctor came to examine him, forcing the boy's tongue down so he could see back into the throat, feeling the nodes in his neck, under his arms, in his groin, she stood stiff, ready to protest if even one cry of pain came from the child. Her lips were white when a needle was inserted into his thin arm; she watched glucose and water seeping into his body as steadily as silence settled over him.

"Rest," the nurses urged her. "Sleep—let me spend the night with him," her husband whispered, weeping inside himself for her, for him, for the three of them. "A day—perhaps two," the doctor pronounced, uneasy at her silence, awkward in the presence of this dual death.

A day. Toward the end of the day the little boy had fits of trembling. A wail filled the room with the first sound he had made since the fever hit its peak. She stood by him, then turned away. His eyes had become the eyes of a stranger's.

She was lying on a cot the nurses had placed in the room when they told her he was dead, that her son had died.

The second day after the funeral, emptiness hung on the mother like a weight. Everywhere she saw parts of her son that had been left behind: a wheel-less truck in the playroom, a torn coloring book half-filled with firm wild strokes. In one corner of the living room lay a small fuzzy toy he had made for the cat. She moved about in silence, bringing the house back to childless perfection: straightening rows of books, pouring orange-flavored aspirin down the sink, scrubbing fingermarks from walls. By late afternoon she had finished everything there was to do. Nothing of the little boy remained, every visible trace of his life had been scrubbed off, thrown away, straightened over. She had done everything there was to do, and yet the force of her energy, the rage at the mutilation of her wholeness had not diminished. She looked in each room again to find one more thing that demanded eradication, something that should become nothing.

She stood in the kitchen, neater than it had been since the boys' birth, her eyes brilliant with inner fever. She could not tolerate the emptiness of her hands. There was nothing further

for her hands to do—her hands accustomed to movement, touch. Her hands more than anything else felt the loneliness.

She was alone—the relatives had gone, her husband back at work at her insistence. Alone in the kitchen she met the eyes of the small grey cat she had brought home wrapped in her sweater, bought rubber toys for, petted, cuddled. She watched the cat crouched under a kitchen chair, her eyes distant and burning.

Everything was as before. The cat must be fed; the house was free of scuffmarks and childish noises. Stiff-fingered, she opened the refrigerator door and removed a carton of milk, half-filling a bowl and placing it on the floor.

Slowly the cat came out from under the chair and approached the bowl. Apprehensive because of her silence, the silence of the house, the absence of the boy, he lapped a moment or two, then turned away, a drop of milk clinging to the fur on the underside of his chin.

“Eat.” The command came out of her silence, she took a step toward the animal, her hands hanging. “Eat.”

The eyes of the cat, the mother, met. “Eat!” she commanded.

Heavy sun formed squares of light on the newly waxed kitchen floor. Motion and thought suspended, the mother stood in her distant world, the only demand on her a toleration of time passing. For moments she stood suspended in emptiness.

A deep breath broke like a sob from her body. Kneeling, she reached for the softness of the cat, her hands touched the tiny vulnerable bones of his arching spine. Then she rose abruptly, reaching upward to the kitchen cupboards. The cat watched, his soft forepaws kneading, as she pulled cans from the shelves. Tuna fish, salmon, cold meats—the cat purred with anticipation as he waited for the food.

Her hands trembled as she set the food on the floor. “Eat,” she whispered. Greedily, the cat lifted chunks of fish with his sharp teeth and tore, chewed, swallowed. From time to time he stopped in his eating and looked up at her. She stood motionless, staring.

The cat ate quickly, slowing as his hunger dwindled, choosing only the portions he liked best. He ate until he was no longer hungry. Lifting a paw to clean his face, he sat on his haunches beside the food, blinking his eyes with the comfort of a full belly.

The mother took a step forward, her eyes on the cat, the cat who had eaten as her son had not been able to eat. Satiated with food, he came toward her, purring, to rub his body against her ankles. A delicate burp came from his rounded belly; he stretched with satisfaction.

The mother looked at the food, only partially eaten, at the small cat winding his satisfied body toward her: "Eat," she directed, the rage and despair of her voice filling the kitchen. "Eat."

Frightened by her voice, by her intensity, the cat turned away to find his escape. With sudden strength and quickness she caught the cat with her hands and held his frightened head over the food. Tears burned her cheeks as she forced the cat's mouth down. "Eat."

Helpless and outraged, the cat struggled. Claws distended, hissing, he fought, searing her arms with long bloody scratches.

Her strong fingers felt the tiny bird bones of his neck, the softness of his body. Her hands were a vise as she pushed the cat's face toward the food, pressing her fingers into the softness of his neck.

"Eat." The command was a howling lament. Then, crouching on the floor beside him, she wept with raging pain that had neither beginning nor end.

Picasso's Pose

JAMES H. BARFOOT

Picasso finally stands before me fixed:
The cigarette in the hand, the old coat,
The old refraction in the eyes. Mixed
After all these years in a remote

Brownness, his photograph is like a pose
Upon a stone revealing rock as well
As man. The captured light shows
Shadows on the face, and in the hands, a swelling

Mound of fingers holds the peasant heritage
Of bringing into line the one-eyed mule's
Demeanor. There the painter of the age
Plays havoc with the muse and waits the fool.

And broken new field freshness from the ground.
Picasso's pose holds hands the plow had found

Poem For The Weekend I Read

35 Western Novels

SAMUEL GREEN

FRIDAY

Evening rounds. Interns gather about my bed
like distant relatives around a grave. A surgeon
shuffles a deck of x-rays, holds one up
to the light, points out my smashed left leg:
bits of shattered bone like shards of clay.
“Amputation’s come a long way,” he says.
“You’ll hardly know it’s gone.” He laughs
and sets the cutting day.
A red cross volunteer stumbles in with paperbacks
stacked up to her double chin, dumps Luke Short,
Zane Grey, all over my lap. Wishes me luck.

SATURDAY

Three in the morning, I watch the dim room breathe
around me like a sick lung. Nurses are gray sheets
drifting through the ward on invisible clotheslines.
Nothing’s clear, like staring at the future through
cheesecloth. *How will I look with one leg?*
How do one-legged people make love?
Will anyone want to go to bed with me?

After breakfast the boy two beds down begins to whine
from pain in his arm below the stump,
like a telephone not there, but ringing, ringing.

The day plods past like a tired cow. Outside
my window a pair of cliff swallows builds a nest.
Between books I watch them fly by with twigs,
leaves, grass stems. The speed of their light
wings, their intricate patience, appalls me.

SUNDAY

My noon demerol creeps over me heavy and warm as an old wool comforter. I dream for the first time since the accident: in a desert, hopping on one leg around a waterhole, see an arm fringed with buckskin rise from brown water, offer a pair of stag handled six guns. A white horse, big as a bull, trots up and waits to be mounted. I strap on the guns and swing into the silver saddle just as a jeep smashes into us and I wake up with wet pajamas.

I spend the afternoon wiggling the toes of my left foot five hundred times, until the skin rubs raw against plaster.

On the far end of the ward the crippled aide begins limping from bed to bed collecting urinals. I take mine and fill it, precise as a chemist, to the glass lip, the edge of gravity, lie back and watch the swallows, wait for him to try and empty it.

Songs for a Soviet Composer

KELLY CHERRY

Song of Despair

I dream that you dream
of kissing me. Your mouth fastens on mine
like a fly on fly paper; my throat vaults under your hands
like a stream over rock; my back's hot and insubstantial as steam
from a pot on the stove. After supper, I latch the door.
Light leaks out of the sky. Night, like space, will sunder the south
from the far north, and leave me missing you as before.

Body Song

Put your mouth on mine
and make music with my windpipe:
my throat is a thirsty flute only sound can slake.

Each heartbeat is a note: draw your art from my body like blood,
teach spine and sinew song,
and play me all night long.

Song of the Housewife

I strip the sheets from my bed
and the map from my world, bleach Red China
white. My clothes flap like Russian crows on the line
all night. Boundaries are piled like clothespins in my lap.
Each thought is a trip—but no one knows
where my garden grows. I clip slips of nations, grafting
your name onto my wild rose.

Mina

NAHID RACHLIN

I still see Ahvaz, an arid town in Western Iran—its narrow, interweaving streets, its sunsets, and hazy noons. An immense bridge arches over a river, covered by row boats. Barefooted children play on the bank. The owners of boats, young, thin men, sing sad, dirge-like songs while waiting for customers. Dead fish wash off to the shore. Every year a few people died on the street, struck by the sun. Undiagnosed diseases killed others.

I think of my sister, Mina. I wonder what she would be like now if she were alive, whether her death would have been prevented in another place. I recall her running on the cemented balcony surrounding our house—back and forth—then stopping by me, her head coming to my shoulder.

SHE WAS THREE YEARS younger than I was. We walked to school together, stopping sometimes in the bazaar on the way to buy dried chick peas and raisins to have later for snacks. During recess we met in the school courtyard to exchange a few words, complaints about the teachers.

At home we formed an alliance against our parents. We schemed to disobey their orders. Our house was large and had many rooms, spaced far apart; ceiling fans went round and round at high speeds nine months of the year, producing a hum, muffling other sounds—making it easy for subterfuge. We would go to bed and then get up and tiptoe up the steep stairway to the roof. On the flat roof we leaned on the parapet and watched a movie on the outdoor screen of the theatre across the street. They showed one movie—often foreign dubbed into Persian—every two weeks and we saw each several times. We stayed up there under flaring stars, looking at the pictures on the distant screen, barely hearing the sound track, until one of us would start dozing off.

When the heat became too intense we all slept under mosquito nettings, three of them set up on the roof, one for our

parents, one for Mina and me, and one for the maid. Our maid would crush an immense block of ice—she purchased one every day—put pieces of it in earthen jars and filled the jars with water. We would take a jar with us to our mosquito nettings to drink during the night—the heat and dryness parched our throats, waking us during the night. Mina and I would take pieces of ice out of the jars and rub them on our foreheads as we lay on our backs, watching the bright stars, their patterns and shapes.

Occasionally I woke to hear my parents arguing quietly, sometimes about us.

“Mina is the bad influence,” my mother said once.

“They’re only children. I never thought about work when I was their age.”

“I think it’s better if each of them has her own room.”

“Let me get some sleep now . . .”

Their voices became indistinguishable, lost in the sounds of cicadas and frogs.

I told Mina about the argument. She became moody and said she would not go to school that day. Then she cut up her school uniform, gray with a rounded white collar, and stuffed it into the toilet on the balcony. The toilet was a large hole in the ground and she had to pour several pails of water into it to dispose of the piece of cloth. She told my parents that she had lost the uniform and would not go to school until she had another one.

My mother took her to the tailor on the main street and asked him to make a uniform on the same day, promising him a larger amount that he would normally charge. In the evening my father saw the cut up pieces of the uniform which had surfaced in the toilet and punished Mina by making her stay in her room alone and go to bed early without eating dinner. I sneaked into the room, was caught and forced to go to bed early too without dinner, in a room that became mine.

ON THE DAY Mina became ill, we were leaning on the railing of the balcony and looking out at the street. Vendors shouted the worth of their merchandise. Customers touched the goods with their fingers. Camels rested in the shade. Palm leaves above walls around houses were dry—it had not rained for several months.

“Look, look,” she said, pointing to a woman carrying a basket of fruit. “She is so yellow.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Everything is yellow.”

She put her hand in mine. "I'm cold."

"Go inside and rest."

"No." She leaned her head on my arm. It felt heavy and limp. She began to shake. "I'm going in."

I followed her through a room leading to a porch, and down some stairs to her room. She went to bed immediately.

No one else was home.

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

She shook her head and, turning to her side, closed her eyes.

I came back to the balcony. A hot wind started to blow, shaking the palm fronds and the *chadors* shrouding the women, bringing flies and grasshoppers out into the air. Somewhere a door slammed and slammed again.

Later in the afternoon, I heard my parents' voices in the courtyard, fluttery and nervous, talking about her.

"She has very high fever," my mother said.

"Dr. Jamali is out of town. I don't trust any of the others."

"We have to do what we can."

At dinner we heard a high, thin call from Mina's room. My mother ran out and my father and I followed.

We stood around her bed and looked at her. She was asleep; she breathed unevenly.

A cloth and a basin filled with water lay next to the bed. My mother dipped the cloth in the water and rubbed it on Mina's forehead. She repeated that a few times. Mina gave out a deep sigh but did not wake.

"She must have been delirious," my mother said when we left the room.

"What does delirious mean?"

"It comes from high fever. It gives you bad dreams."

When we returned to the dining room the food, smoked fish, rice, and a salad made of yoghurt, cucumber and spices, repelled me. I sat there and watched my parents eat, trying to imagine what Mina had dreamed that had made her cry out like that. I thought of a black, flat shape with long tentacles invading her limbs and she trying to fight it off. Through the curtains I could see the sunset making a bruise in the sky.

Soon, no matter how much I insisted, I was not allowed into her room. Someone, my mother, father, or our maid, always stayed with her. I wondered what she looked like, if her eyes had changed color.

I wrote a note to her and gave it to our maid to deliver.

"I'm not allowed to come into your room. Write me how you feel." In the corner of the paper I drew a picture of myself—a large face without a body, two tears under the eyes.

The maid came out in a few hours with no response. "She

doesn't feel well enough to answer."

"Did she read the note?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing."

I went to my room and sat motionlessly on my bed for a long time, becoming aware of the yellowish color of the walls, the dead flies lying on the wide mouldings, the holes in the doors dug by termites, aware that the room was too large, the wooden chair I sat on to do homework uncomfortable, my bed sagging.

I sent her more notes but she left each unanswered as though angry at me. Perhaps she was angry.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked my mother over and over.

"I don't know." She had tears in her eyes most of the time.

"Is she going to get well?"

"I think so." She would kiss me absently.

One afternoon, sitting on the shady part of the porch and doing homework, I saw a tall man, holding a black briefcase, walking into the house with my father. They talked intensely, looking serious. The man was the third doctor they were trying. My mother came out of Mina's room and hurried towards them. Then they all went inside.

In the hot midday, there were no sounds from the nearby streets. I heard vividly Mina screaming. I went to the edge of the porch and leaned down. The doctor came out into the courtyard, holding a syringe with a long needle. He examined it in the bright light and went back in.

I left the porch and stood outside of Mina's room, listening. The room was long and narrow like a hallway and had no windows. After a while I heard whispers, then Mina's voice, "Mommy, more water."

Silence followed. All of a sudden she called my name. I waited. The latch was taken off and my mother and the doctor came out. Before they shut the door again, I had a glimpse of Mina. She lay on her back on the white sheet with her hands at her sides. Her stomach had become immense, her hair was sweaty, and her teeth, through her half-opened mouth, looked black.

"Mina," I called.

She did not reply.

Soon after that she died. I came home from school to see two men carrying her out on a wooden stretcher. She was wrapped in a black cloth and looked like a small mummy with an immense belly. My mother and father stood in the courtyard and cried. My body was frozen like Mina's and no tears came into my eyes.

I raised my hand to pull off the cloth to look at Mina and dropped it. I went into the room, thinking for an instant that perhaps it was not her they were carrying away. Her bed stood empty and gave off a sour smell. An earthen jug had overturned on the floor and water flowed out of it. A rag doll lay in the flow. I picked up the wet doll and went out. I noticed for the first time, that it had rained at some point and puddles of water shone on the uneven, brick-covered ground of the courtyard.

IT RAINED A LOT that winter and there were frequent storms. Whole branches fell off the dry palm leaves, garbage cans behind houses rolled into gutters, doors, everywhere, slammed incessantly. None of us mentioned Mina after she was buried. At school I avoided answering questions about her. I began to work hard, reading during the hours I would have played with her.

One night I woke, shivering, my face and arms stabbed by something. I sat up and turned on the light. I realized it was pieces of hail I felt against my skin. I had neglected to latch the window from the inside and it had opened with the hard wind. I put my coat on and walked out into the courtyard. My parents were still up—I could see the lights behind the living room windows. I went into the room. My father sat on the rug on the floor under the naked bulb of a lamp, reading. He was a lawyer and often read legal books late into the night. My mother sat beside him, knitting a sweater. I had a vivid vision of Mina, wrapped up in a white cloth, being carried away on a stretcher, the doors to her room wide open like a hungry mouth.

“What are you doing up?” my mother asked, looking at me, her hands still busy with the knitting.

“I . . . I . . .” It was hard to talk, to express the immense longing I felt for Mina. “I wish . . .” I began to cry.

I AM THIRTY FIVE years old and live in Boston now, a city very different from Ahvaz. I have been married twice and had three miscarriages. Last night my lover left me.

I cried after he left, my tears wetting the pillow. Mina’s memory came to me and I realized each time I have a loss I think about her, her death.

Marginalia . . .

(continued)

The result seems to be about the same, since most students see little connection between this abstract subject called "English" and the kind of English they actually have to read and write themselves. What is not taught in English class often enough is reading and writing. In a recent Saturday Review article, "Why Jessie Hates English," novelist Sloan Wilson attacked the study of grammar for its own sake. "The fact that it is necessary to learn to speak and write grammatically," wrote Wilson, "does not mean that one must devote much time to the abstract study of grammar. One should, instead, study, of all things, speaking and writing."

Neither Mr. Wilson nor I is opposed to the study of grammar—only to the study of grammar in isolation from reading, writing, and speaking. When elementary school students perceive "English" and "grammar" as identical and see it as endlessly repetitive, it is clear that the discipline of English is being narrowed to a fraction of its true dimensions. On the other hand, it is amazing what diversity can be taught in the name of English. Those "relevant" school systems which eschew the teaching of traditional grammar find other things to call English. The students learn the art of telephone communication, analyze TV commercials, study advertising, and discuss contemporary films. Interesting though some of these studies may be, they are not what English courses are all about. Too often, such discussions become aimless bull sessions.

We are currently hearing much talk about "back to basics." I would like to think that meant teaching students how to read different kinds of literature, how to write clearly and correctly, and how to speak articulately and intelligently. But I am afraid that in too many English classes it is simply going to mean more grammar exercises, more vocabulary lists, more spelling rules.

My pessimism is based on the fact that such an approach is pedagogically appealing. Students can be graded "right" or "wrong," and in most school systems, such neatness counts. Only the most dedicated teachers will continue to assign books to be read and compositions to be written, encouraging painstaking growth in those areas in which one is never finished learning. The growth might not be neat or easily measureable, but there are those of us who think that kind of growth is the most permanent and the most worthwhile.

—J. J. K.

Contributors

MI. LIBERMAN is Oakes Ames Professor of English at Grinnell College in Iowa. He is the author of a critical study of Katherine Anne Porter and numerous short stories, several of which have appeared previously in these pages. MARGHERITA WOODS FAULKNER teaches in the public school system in West Lafayette, Indiana. ALFRED CORN's book, *All Roads at Once*, was published by Viking last year. He was chosen as one of the four authors of a first book of poems to read in the New York YMHA's "Introduction" program. The poem in this issue is taken from a long sequence on New York City, present and past. MICHAEL WATERS has appeared in *Four Quarters* several times, as well as in *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, and others. He has recently completed his doctorate at Ohio University. "Nativity" is the third story by ANNABEL THOMAS to appear here. Others have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Epoch*, and other quarterlies. DANIEL MINOCK lives in Detroit. One of his "Remedial Student" poems appeared in our Spring issue, and other poems have appeared in *Hiram Poetry Review* and *Poetry Northwest*. HELEN HAUKENESS has published in the *Yale Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Cimarron Review*. This story marks her introduction to our readers. SAMUEL GREEN's poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Poet and Critic*, and in the Autumn issue of the present volume. KELLY CHERRY is also making a return appearance here with three poems from a sequence entitled "Songs for a Soviet Composer." She is currently living in England. NAHID RACHLIN has had work in *Shenandoah*, *Prism International*, and in an anthology, *Elements of Fiction: Introduction to the Short Story*, edited by Peter Neumeyer. One of his stories won the Bennet Cerf Award. Mr. Rachlin, who lives in New York, has held the Doubleday-Columbia Fellowship and the Wallace Stegner Fellowship for Creative Writing at Stanford.

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